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ABSTRACT

The Austin Independent School District Office of Research and Evaluation (AISD-ORE) has recently completed a three year study of the effects of retention on elementary students. As in other studies comparing the academic achievement of elementary retainees and similar students not retained, findings indicated that promoted students generally show better gains. However, retention decisions must be made on an individual basis, and retention does help some students. This paper discusses some alternate ways this school district has explored the effects of retention. One study judged success of individual retainees by the opinions of teachers and parents, and by reading gains on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. The other study investigated differences in growth patterns in reading and math for retainees before, during, and after retention. Findings across the three-year study are summarized. The Parent Survey and Questions for Teachers of Retainees are presented in the appendices. Also included is a bibliography listing 16 publications from the AISD-ORE relating to promotion retention. (Author/PN)

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Does Retention Help?
Perspectives After Three Years

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Does Retention Help?
Perspectives After Three Years

The Austin Independent School District Office of Research and Evaluation has recently completed a three year study of the effects of retention on elementary students. As in other studies comparing the academic achievement of elementary retainees and similar students not retained, we found that promoted students generally show better gains. However, retention decisions must be made on an individual basis and retention does help some students. This paper discusses some alternative ways the Austin Independent School District has explored the effects of retention. One study based success of individual retainees on the opinions of teachers, parents, and reading gains on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. The other study investigated differences in growth patterns in reading and math for retainees before, during, and after retention. Findings across the three-year study are summarized.

Perspectives

The Austin Independent School District's Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) has studied the effects of an elementary retention policy on students over the last three years. The policy, adopted in April, 1981 specifies that:

- Students who are at least one year behind in reading basals at grades one through six and/or one year behind in mastering math competencies at grades four through six should be considered for retention. Other factors such as age, language, physical development, social maturity, behavior, and absence rate should then also be considered in making retention decisions.

- In general, students should be retained no more than once in grades K-3 and once in 4-6.

- Teachers and principals have the final responsibility for retention decisions, and steps are detailed to be taken in the retention process. Parents are to be notified as early as possible (at least two months before the end of the school year) that retention is a possibility. Teachers must confer with the parents and help them see the positive aspects of retention. Teachers are also to prepare instructional information for the students' next teachers. The fall teachers then must make sure students' learning needs are considered and that they do not simply repeat the same material in the same way again.

Research Literature. The research literature was reviewed before the study was initiated (see bibliography). Jackson (1975) presented a good overview of the main types of research that had been conducted and their methodological flaws.

1) Comparison of retainees and similar low achievers. Jackson indicates that these studies generally find that low achievers who are promoted make larger gains, on the average, than those retained. This agrees with findings of ORE (1982, 1983) and a recent meta-analysis by Holmes and Matthews (1984). The bias inherent in these studies, however, is that one group was promoted, the other retained. Although the wide variation in retention rates across AISD schools suggests that a student who would be retained in one school would be promoted in another (dampening this bias at least), this argument cannot be lightly dismissed.

2) Comparison of retainees' gains before and during retention. Studies that compared gains of retainees before they were retained to those during retention (typically six months or one year after the retention began) found that gains improved with retention. This approach is, however, flawed in favor of finding improved gains. There is no control group, the students had been doing poorly, and there is no way to know if factors other than retention made the difference (e.g. perhaps just being identified as needing assistance helps).

3) Experimental design. The third approach, difficult to carry out in a school district setting, randomly promoted or retained students. AISD attempted to use such a design with a sample of students identified as potential retainees, but the approach was rejected by the school district administration for a number of legal, practical, political, and ethical reasons.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are to:

1) Briefly describe ways in which AISD has studied the effects of retention on elementary students and our findings.

2) Describe in more detail two less traditional ways AISD has explored the effects of retention.

3) Discuss whether retention helps based on AISD's research.

Methods and Results

A variety of approaches have been taken in AISD's policy analysis. The basic approaches and findings of AISD's three-year study are briefly described in Figure 1.

The primary focus of this paper will be a more detailed look at two approaches used during the third year of this study (1983-84).

1) Success study. Because retention decisions must be made on an individual basis and success is often a subjective judgement of the parties involved, a success study was designed to assess retention's effects on an individual basis. The attitudes of teachers and parents, along with achievement test scores, were employed as the criteria for success.

2) Patterns of growth. The achievement growth of retainees in reading and math before, during, and after retention was studied in an effort to examine the effects of retention longitudinally and see whether these effects varied across subject areas.

The Success Study

A random sample of 251 students who repeated a grade in the 1983-84 school year was selected for the success study. Retainees' success was judged by:

- The opinions of parents (see Attachment 1),
- The opinions of teachers (see Attachment 2),
- ITBS Reading Total gains of .8 grade equivalent (GE) years or more while retained (the national average for low achievers).

Parents and teachers were surveyed in April, 1984.

TOPIC, METHOD	RESULTS
1. Retention rates by ethnicity, sex, income, grade (based on school reports, District computer files).	Students more likely to be retained: Hispanics and Blacks, males, free lunch participants, first graders.
2. Retention rates by achievement status [percentile scores on Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS)].	Most retainees were low achievers (84% scored below the 31st percentile). However, only 16% of those scoring at this level were retained.
3. Retainee gains between time recommended for retention and end of retention year [ITBS grade equivalent (GE) scores spring to spring].	On the average, students gained about .85 of a year in reading and .65 of a year in math during the year repeated.
4. Retainee gains compared to grade level averages (ITBS GE scores)	On the average, students remain below grade level after retention but do come close at the primary level (still far behind in intermediate grades).
5. Successful versus unsuccessful retainees--interventions (case study interviews of twelve teachers of retainees)	Teachers of successful retainees: 1) Identified the source of students' academic problems 2) Developed and implemented a plan to address needs 3) Persevered and did whatever was necessary to help the students.
6. Achievement of retainees and similar nonretained students after 1, 2, 3 years (students matched on demographic characteristics and pre-assessment achievement, regression analysis for three groups of retainees).	On the average, retainees almost always gained significantly less in math and usually less in reading.
7. Characteristics of students who benefit from retention (discriminant analysis)	No consistent pattern of characteristics predicted success. Key social factors not on computer files may play a key part.

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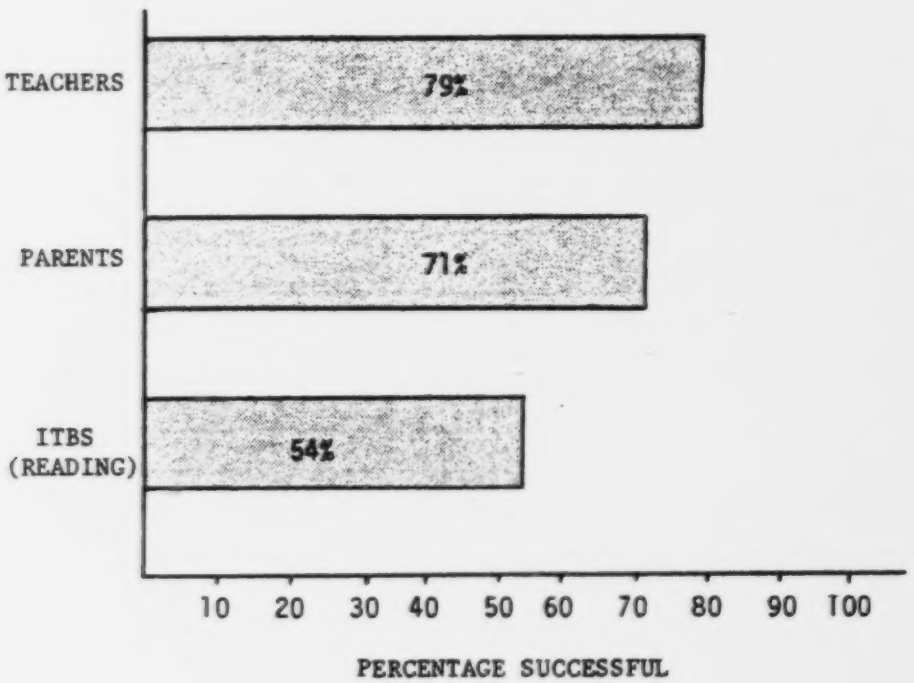
Figure 1. AISD RETENTION EVALUATION. Ways in which the effects of retention were studied over three years along with results. (Page 1 of 2).

TOPIC, METHOD	RESULTS
8. Pattern of achievement before, during, and after retention (ITBS GE scores and gains over a four-year period)	In reading, gains improved during retention but then fell slightly. In math, gains decreased during retention and improved with promotion.
9. Success study (based on teacher opinion, parent opinion, and ITBS gains of .8 of a GE year or more in reading).	Teachers and parents were more likely to see students as successful compared to ITBS gains. All three sources agreed that child was successful in only 29% of the cases; however, two of three sources agreed in 79% of the cases.
10. Achievement gains in schools with high and low retention rates (ITBS gains of students in schools retaining higher and lower percentages of low achievers, regression)	Achievement gains in reading and math did not vary in five of six comparisons.

Figure 1. AISD RETENTION EVALUATION. Ways in which the effects of retention were studied over three years along with results. (Page 2 of 2).

Of the original sample, 128 parents (51%) and 251 teachers (96%) returned completed surveys. Overall success was examined for the 121 retainees for whom both surveys and ITBS Reading Total scores for 1982-83 and 1983-84 were available. As illustrated below, 79% of the teachers and 71% of the parents thought retainees had been successful (based on the items rating overall success). These 121 students were successful based on ITBS reading scores in 54% of the cases.



The number of information sources indicating that these retainees were successful is shown below.

Sources Showing Success	Number of Cases	Percentage
3 out of 3	35	29%
2 out of 3	60	50%
1 out of 3	21	17%
0 out of 3	5	4%
Total Cases	121	100%

Figure 2. RETAINEE SUCCESS. Based on parent and teacher opinion and ITBS reading gains of eight grade-equivalent months or more in a one-year period.

These results show that:

- All three sources agreed the child had been successful as a retainee in 29% of the cases (35 of 121).
- At least two of the three sources agreed that the student was a success as a retainee in 79% (95 of 121) of the cases.
- Only one source thought the child was successful as a retainee in 17% (21 of 121) of the cases.
- All three information sources indicated that 4% of the students (5 of 121) were unsuccessful as retainees.

The success study results also indicated that:

- In 58% of the cases, parents and teachers agreed the child had been successful. However, the ITBS showed success for only half of these cases.
- In 25% of the cases, the ITBS showed success but at least one other source did not.

The success of the 54 first graders in the sample was examined separately with very similar results. All three sources agreed the child was successful as a retainee in 28% of the cases; two of three sources agreed in 83% of the cases. Only one source indicated success in 17% of the cases.

The success study revealed that teachers and parents are more likely to see retention as helpful than achievement test score gains. If the people who deal with the child daily feel retention has been a success, perhaps the students' classroom performance and attitude toward school really has improved. On the other hand, teachers and parents have a vested interest in seeing the child improve after taking such a drastic step. Also, the child is bound to understand a little more the second time the same material is covered. The question which can never adequately be answered is whether the child, given some extra help, could have been promoted and done as well or better. It is at least reassuring that most of those who deal with the child daily believe the intervention has been successful.

It is surprising that all three sources agreed on retention's success in only 29% of the cases. It is encouraging, however, that two of three sources viewed retention as successful in four out of five cases. If this is considered the criteria for success, the wrong decision was made in one of five cases.

The results of this type of study bring the question of retention's success to a more personal and individual level. Because retention decisions must be made on an individual, subjective basis, this seems more appropriate than simply investigating average growth of retainees versus other low achievers. It is too easy to conclude from the comparison of averages that no one should be retained. These studies mask the fact that, even based on achievement alone, some students (even though less than half) do seem to benefit from retention in the short run.

The question neither type of study addresses very well is which students are most likely to benefit from retention. Unfortunately, a discriminant analysis done by ORE in 1982-83 failed to reveal characteristics which would predict success.

Patterns of Growth

Austin's study of growth patterns is actually an extension of those mentioned by Jackson (1975) which investigate change in growth before and during retention. However, it allows the opportunity to see what happens to retainees once they are promoted. If retention does not necessarily boost gains while the students are retained, do gains at least improve once students are promoted?

The average growth of elementary students repeating a grade in 1982-83 before, during, and after retention was examined.

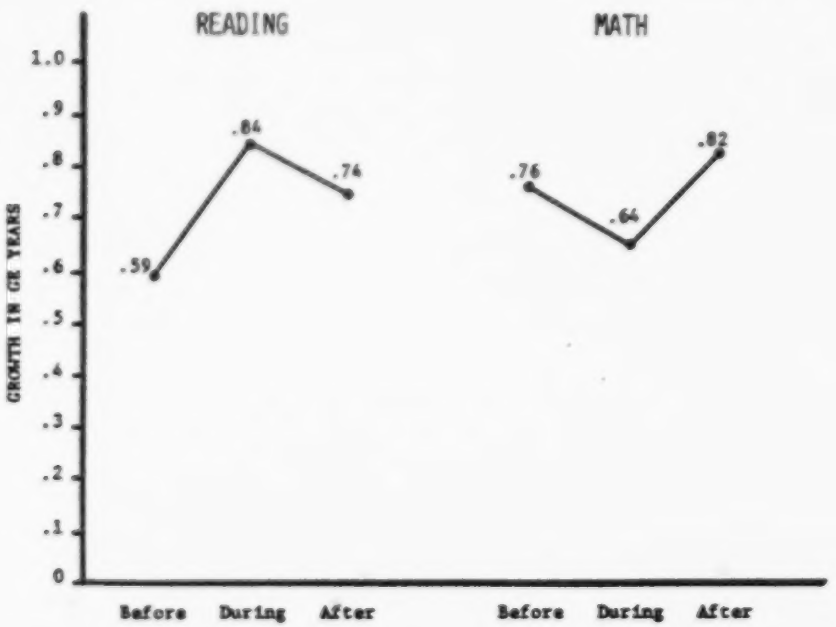


Figure 3. AVERAGE GROWTH PATTERNS FOR THOSE REPEATING A GRADE IN 1982-83 BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER RETENTION. Sample included 396 students with Reading Total and 414 students with Math Total ITBS scores for the last four years.

As Figure 3 illustrates:

- Retainees' reading gains improved during the year repeated but then declined once the students were promoted.

- Retainees' math gains decreased during the retention year but increased once students were promoted.

The reading pattern suggests that students were doing poorly in reading when they were retained and that retention did improve this growth rate. However, growth slowed somewhat once students were promoted and no longer identified as students with special needs. Students may not have been able to handle the more difficult material well. These results run contrary to the belief that retainees will be able to make better gains after promotion, although at least growth did not slow to its previous low level.

In math, retainees were not as far behind when recommended for retention. The fact that growth rates slow during retention and increase with promotion suggests students are not sufficiently challenged with new material during the retention year.

Does Retention Help?

After three years of study and a variety of approaches to this question, the answer must be a qualified yes. Retention does appear to help some students, but the number helped varies with the criteria used.

- Retention helps three of four retainees based on parent and teacher opinion at the end of the year repeated. However, teachers and parents agreed on success in only two of four cases. Achievement results in reading suggest that two in four benefit or at least are not harmed.

- Long-term achievement results suggest that retention does not help most students (again, some do benefit).

  - In reading, gains increase during the retention year but slow after promotion.

  - In mathematics, gains decrease during the year retained and increase only after promotion.

The pattern that is typically seen is that most students, even if they benefit in the short run, cannot maintain the improved growth rate. Eventually, they end up as far behind as ever.

Further research into two areas might be of benefit:

1) An extensive study focused on identifying characteristics of those who do benefit from retention, and

2) Studies of alternative types of interventions which could prevent retention or provide innovative alternative curriculum settings for these students.

The real question, in the end, is not whether students are retained or not, but the type of special help they are offered once identified. Because retention is a costly option in many ways, it appears it should be used only if there is a good chance that it will help more than another intervention. The key is not only to determine when this is the case, but to do everything possible to keep students from getting this far behind in the first place. How to accomplish this, of course, has always been a dilemma for educators.

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AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT
Office of Research and Evaluation

Parent Survey

¿Habla usted español? Vea el otro lado de esta página.

This survey is being sent to a sample of parents whose children are now repeating a grade in AISD. We understand your child is receiving instruction at the same grade level this year (1983-84) as last year (1982-83). We would like to know how you feel about this. The information will be used to help the schools serve retained students better — your personal answers will not be shown to anyone outside our office. Also, this survey has nothing to do with your child's placement for next year.

PLEASE CIRCLE YES, NO, OR NOT SURE TO SHOW WHAT YOU THINK ABOUT EACH STATEMENT.

	YES	NO	NOT SURE
1. My child has learned more this year than last year. N=127	86.6%	3.1%	10.2%
2. My child likes school more this year than last year. N=127	78.7%	7.9%	13.4%
3. Last year's teacher helped me feel comfortable about the retention of my child. N=126	67.5%	23.0%	9.5%
4. This year's teacher has kept me informed about my child's progress. N=125	89.6%	6.4%	4.0%
5. Being retained has helped my child be more successful in school. N=128	77.3%	9.4%	13.3%
6. Last spring, I thought it was a good idea for my child to repeat a grade this year. N=128	66.4%	15.6%	18.0%
7. I now think it was a good idea to retain my child. N=127	72.4	15.7%	11.3%

CALL BELINDA OLIVAREZ TURNER AT 458-1227 IF YOU HAVE A QUESTION. PLEASE RETURN THIS FORM BY APRIL 16 IN THE ENCLOSED ENVELOPE. THANK YOU.

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Attachment 2

AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT
Office of Research and Evaluation

Questions for Teachers of Retainees

This year, we are attempting to use teachers' opinions, parents' opinions, and ITBS scores to measure the success of a sample of retainees. For the student listed above, please circle yes, no, or not sure to show your opinion on each statement.

Call Belinda Turner at 458-1228 if you have a question.

	YES	NO	NOT SURE
1. The quality of this students' work has improved throughout the year. N = 242	84.7%	10.3%	5.0%
2. This student has been successful in school this year. N = 241	86.3%	9.1%	4.6%
3. This student functions in a higher level instructional group this year than last year. N = 241	81.7%	10.8%	7.5%
4. This student could have been promoted and would have been successful in the next higher grade. N = 242	3.7%	75.2%	21.1%
5. This student has shown a positive attitude towards school and learning. N = 233	83.7%	9.4%	6.9%

Please return this survey by April 9 through the school mail. The ORE address is shown on the back of this form. Fold so address shows or return in inter-office mailer to:

Administration Bldg. - ORE
Belinda Turner

THANK YOU!

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